

**“YOU SING, YOU / WHO ALSO/ WANTS:” CHARLES OLSON, HARRYETTE  
MULLEN, AND THE REPRESENTATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNITIES IN 20<sup>TH</sup>  
CENTURY AVANT-GARDE AMERICAN POETRY**

by

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In this thesis, I examine the way in which avant-garde American poetry enacts an expansion of the community to which it speaks and desires to include, focusing on the first section of Charles Olson’s opus *The Maximus Poems* and Harryette Mullen’s *Muse & Drudge*. Specifically, in an argument parallel to Jacques Rancière’s critique of an inherent, platonic ruling class, I explore how these poets enact an expansion of the distribution of the sensible, in an attempt to move beyond the conception of poetry as something which is done by a poetic elite for the benefit of a less capable majority.

In explaining Olson’s solution to the existence of this dichotomy, I discuss Olson’s debt to Pound, and the ways in which the latter’s techniques becomes less elitist and more populist in the course of Olson’s poetic development. In essays such as “Projective Verse” and “Human Universe,” Olson outlines the ways in which poetry, which he thought could allow for a conception of community which would contain active, self-sufficient and equal individuals. These concepts are brought to fruition in two poems entitled “Letter from Georges,” where Olson allows the historical voices of fishermen to replace his own. In ceding the voice of the poem to outside sources, Olson enacts the leveled community that he has been gesturing towards elsewhere in his writings, demonstrating how his own perspective is just one of the many

necessary contributions that different individuals can offer to the community being outlined in the first book of the *Maximus Poems*.

The later section of the essay is devoted to Mullen and how she engages issues of black femininity, representation, and the ways in which representations from outside the communities Mullen portrays flattens the inner lives of their members. My readings show how she critiques both those outside representations that would reduce black women to stereotypes, while also revealing how the voices of these women are already capable of self-representation. In juxtaposing the different communities of Mullen and Olson, the thesis demonstrates how the expansion of the poetic subject is an ongoing concern in a strain of avant-garde poetry.

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## A PREFACE AND A READING

In “Letter 5,” an early segment of the American poet Charles Olson’s opus, *The Maximus Poems* (1950-1970), the narrator, the titular Maximus, takes aim at a fellow poet and friend Ferrini, who, while running the local literary journal, has let his pretensions cloud his conception of what counts as good poetry. The poem mocks the opinions of these “culture mongers,” who complain “about what the people don’t know but oh! / how beautiful they are, how infinite!” (22). This ridicule is brought into sharper relief by the location of the journal (and *The Maximus Poems* as a whole): Gloucester, Massachusetts, a small coastal fishing village and not a major hub of intellectual activity. Olson had first met Ferrini, who was employed as an assembly-line worker by General Electric, in 1949, when, after returning home to Gloucester to visit his ailing mother, Olson decided to visit the man who had become known locally as the de facto town poet (Clark, *Allegory of a Poet’s Life* 150). Ferrini’s own blue-collar status makes the criticisms in “Letter 5” all the more stinging—in embracing as real the distinction that simultaneously praises and damns those qualities as lesser that designate a concept of “the people” in the first place would also serve, then, implicitly as a rejection of their poetic kinship. Rejecting this dichotomy, Olson’s poem goes on to say,

The mind, Ferrini,  
is as much of a labor  
as to lift an arm

flawlessly

Or to read sand in the butter at the end of a lead.

And to be precise about what sort of bottom your vessel's over (*Maximus* 27)

The life of the mind, i.e. the life of the intellectual or Ferrini-poet, is not as distinct from material labor as the dichotomy created between “people” and “poet” presumes. It can even involve the same kinds of actions, as demonstrated by the poem's installation of the verbs of intellectual activity in more earthly contexts. Instead of verse, one reads the “sand in the butter;” instead of metrical regularity, one must be “precise about what sort of bottom” the ship sails over. This is not to diminish poetry—Olson does not banish the poet from his republic by any means. Ferrini, and poets of his ilk, err in diminishing their subjects by reinforcing the false idea of a cultural elite that is uniquely able to represent “the people.” For Olson, this separation of the poet from those depicted by poetry removes from the genre its capacity to actively involve its readers in the creation of meaning. The mere representation of the people in their “infinite” is not enough; to erase the binary between the people and the poet, the voices of non-poetic figures must be brought into the poem itself. This distinction between the artist and the object of his representation that Olson finds and attacks in Ferrini's work goes against the concept of the *polis*, an ideal political community that has been lost in the modernization and industrialization of the West, which, in his *Maximus Poems* and elsewhere, Olson attempts to bring back into being.

Two moments in “Letter 5” appear to contradict the reading offered above; however, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Olson's own idiosyncratic (a nice way of saying occasionally contradictory) usage obscures his point. In section seven of the poem, Olson



appears to insist upon the distinction between the world of poetry and the world of Gloucester proper:

A magazine does have this 'life' to it (proper to it), does have streets,  
can show lights movie houses, bars, and, occasionally,  
for those of us who do live our life quite properly in print  
as properly, say, as Gloucester people live in Gloucester  
you do meet someone/ as I met you/ on a printed page. (*Maximus* 28)

From this excerpt alone, it is possible to take Olson, as meaning that there is something distinct and properly contained about the literary life as opposed to the life of the city. However, the near-prose stanza that begins the section makes it clear that Olson's conception of literature here is something more creative than the above. Writing to Ferrini concerning his frustrations with the former's stewardship of a literary magazine, he says, "I begin to be damned to figure out where we can meet," before recounting the time when he barged in on Ferrini and his wife, excited to have found another poetic soul in Gloucester who appeared to share his tastes. Yet this relationship has soured. Ferrini is not even given by Olson his proper due; he only "purport[s]" to edit the local magazine. In light of this emphasis on meeting, the section on "a magazine" that follows should instead be as a location with physical geography in its own (metaphorical) right. They met through poetry, not through Gloucester, and, as their shared poetic geography slips away, the significance of the first line of the section becomes clear. Ferrini has slipped from Olson's literary town—their relationship has broken down. Literature had the capacity to create a new meeting place, but its participants must agree to its structure and form.

As for the other instance, *Maximus* (or Olson, as they are typically interchangeable here) says that Ferrini's approach misunderstands poetry, as a literary magazine is not "for example,

politics,” “nor is it life, / with a capital F” (29). The latter, easily enough, is just a reference to Ferrini himself—poetry is more than Ferrini’s own perspective and life. The former invocation of “politics,” on the other hand, is a little more complicated to break down. While it seems to reject the poem as politics, this runs into uncomfortable disharmony other moments in “Letter 5.” For example, part of the insult of the ending (“It’s no use. / There is no place we can meet. / You have left Gloucester.”) stems from the fact that Ferrini has fallen into a group of people that differs from the Gloucester or literary community in which Olson exists, he has been removed from some sort of group. Moreover, this Gloucester, in which Olson locates himself geographically in section 5 especially, is a place “where polis/ still thrives” (26), if, as is discussed elsewhere, in a different fashion than the one that Olson used to know. This sense of change is reinforced by an earlier remark on a local labor scam, where, after working for twelve hours, Olson was among a group of men fired by a company that “had covered, by one day’s cash/ the letter of the law,” a process which is emblematic of a “new way,” which “does promote/ cleverness [referring to the trick used to hire and fire local labor], the main chance is / its law” (25). While one critic reads the final dependent clause in that last-quoted line as a reference to the possibilities of legislative work that would secure the society (von Hallberg 12), I think it is enough to show that the political sphere is deeply embedded in the work of the poem. Olson is concerned with the political sphere—it is Gloucester’s polis that gives it its weight. It may be possible to sequester this moment away as a use of the word “politics” that is meant to evoke the activity in its most debased sense, that of senseless party lines and interpersonal back-scratching, the latter, at least, being confirmed by subsequent lines in “Letter 5” complaining about Ferrini’s editorial choices: “what sticks out in this issue is verse from at least four other editors of literary magazines / / do you think such scratch me back/ gets by our eyes, the few of

us there are who read?" Ferrini has irritated "the few of us who read," has generated the ire of a group of Litterateurs ostensibly (and grammatically) separated from that of the community of "editors / of literary magazines," and so this poem itself seems to be the sort of political act, if aboveground, that Olson just bemoaned. If we have to take Olson at his word in this part, the poem is as good as saying, "You are exiled from the *polis*, Ferrini, and there was nothing political about this decision," or, "The world and its constituents have changed for the worse, but this is outside the ken of the literary field." In the end, it is not possible to read this as a denunciation of political poetry, but of the milieu of the literary magazine (those aforementioned culture mongers, whose aesthetics are insulted in other passages within the poem), and the specific politics of literary sensibility and glad-handing that go along with it.

I open this thesis with an extended reading of "Letter 5" for two reasons. First, I hope to introduce the concerns that drive my work below; namely, the role of the poet in society, and the role of the poet as a proponent of a certain kind of civic discourse while abnegating the didactic or role-model form that Olson accuses Ferrini of falling into. Second, my reading of this poem is emblematic of the difficulties engendered by the poets that I engage. In order to do justice to the difficult projects that poets such as Olson or Harryette Mullen undertake, my readings often have to go beyond the poems themselves in order to make sense of the knotty relationship of the poems to reality, of the poetic speaker's relationship to their own words. Hopefully, in doing so, it becomes clear how these poets enact a political discourse that is actively inclusive through the form and sources of their poetry.

## INTRODUCTION

*In effect, the procedures of social critique have as their goal treating the incapable: those who do not know how to see, who do not understand the meaning of what they see, who do not know how to transform acquired knowledge into activist energy. And doctors need these patients to look after.*

Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*

In this thesis, I will explore how the first book of *The Maximus Poems* and Harryette Mullen's depiction of the singing subjects of her *Muse & Drudge* (1995) act as an alternative to the mode of representation rejected above by examining the relationship between the poets' respective poetics and their inclusion of non-poetic voices while breaking down the binaries of poet and the object of poetic consideration, spectator and participant in their particular social-historical contexts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will argue that the strategies of representation used by the two poets under consideration are, in turn, a political move parallel to Jacques Rancière's concept of the redistribution of the sensible. For Rancière, our reality is made legible by the distribution of the sensible condoned by the policing forces of society. What is outside of this distribution is not legible and not counted in the representation of society as a whole. As the epigraph demonstrates, Rancière is also suspicious of certain proponents of critical theory who construct a divide between those who are aware of the malicious influence of capital and those who are helplessly deceived by the same. In his view, this privileging of certain forms of knowledge, of certain forms of resistance, has led to a stagnation of political action. As Rancière puts it in the

third of his “Theses on Politics,” “It does not simply presuppose a break with the 'normal' distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions 'specific' to these positions” (*Dissensus* 30). Similarly, as “Letter 5” demonstrates, certain poetic depictions of the people disregard the local knowledge that is integral to actual life. Despite the temporal distance between Rancière’s theorizing and Olson’s poetry, the former’s theory of the delimited distribution of the sensible illuminates the politics of representation in the latter’s poetics.

With respect to *The Maximus Poems*, in particular, I will explore how Olson enacts the kind of inclusivity discussed above in the first two poems entitled “Letter on Georges” that instantiate these theoretical concepts by opening up a space for the voices of the heretofore poet-mediated figures of the works to speak for themselves. This technique allows *The Maximus Poems* to encompass the voices of those workers whose activities and identities Olson seeks to preserve. They are an instance in which Olson’s project, by expanding beyond the pronouncements of Maximus himself, becomes something more decidedly democratic—these poems attempt to build a new *polis* and so demand a process that can envision such a political body, and Olson’s method accomplishes this via a *speaking through* rather than a *speaking for*. He does not present his readers with a Wordsworthian valorization of the common folk or a Whitmanian assertion of shared democratic embodiment. Instead, Olson conceives of the non-poet figures not as idealized, pure beings, but as unique individuals, belonging to the *polis* and requiring their own form of representation.

This is not to say that I view Olson’s Gloucester as a utopia or argue that *The Maximus Poems* is an unprecedented project—it is shot through with a hyper-masculine worldview and does not significantly engage with the viewpoints of women or people of color. Michael

Davidson's *Guys Like Us* discusses the noxious form that Olson's own biases against women could take. He writes, "In Olson's imagination of social change, man is active . . . whereas a woman is passive . . ." (35), and passivity, as will be discussed below, is the primary illness of modernity. Thus, while I do not claim that Olson conceived of an all-inclusive community, I will explore how Olson's method in *The Maximus Poems* returns the representation of a community to its constituents. Nor do I view *Maximus* as a project without precedent. It might also be argued that William Carlos Williams made a similar inclusive move when he incorporated newspaper articles and letters from other poets in to the body of his *Paterson*, an epic poem which was itself an attempt to represent the totality of a specific community and place. However, the difference between the two modernist epics lies in the fact that, while Williams treated the city of Paterson as a heroic figure in his (its) own right, the Maximus figure is more ambiguously authoritative, which has important implications for my thesis.

In moving beyond Olson, I will explore how a similar democratic move in the later poet Harryette Mullen looks very different due to the intervening influence of the Language movement, and their skepticism concerning of the act of writing poetry for another person at all, a move presaged by Olson's own inward turn in a later "Letter on Georges." To this end, Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* is utilized in this essay as a kind of development of (or alternative to) the dissensual tendency that I identify in Olson. In order to explore how the democratic potential that I find in Olson's work continues on the poets that follow him in the generalized Pound tradition, as Perloff might put it, I will conclude with a final, major section that engages with Language poetry and permutations that the movement's theoretical commitments require of poetry so that no intellectual contradictions arise. In doing so, the singing subjects of Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* will serve as the central example of a

poetic text that, although it looks nothing like Olson's, embodies the same kind of active and open democratic potentiality. Additionally, this section will explore the ways in which of the speaking "I" itself has been expanded such that the sort of inclusion that occurs in Mullen looks very different from the textual citation and quotation that marks some of Olson's more interesting poems.

In engaging with Olson and Mullen via Language poetry, my purpose is not to identify a teleological path that democratic poetics followed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but to explore the ways in which different poets, with very different ideas of their poetries, enact the same sorts of democratic potentialities in different socio-cultural and metaphysical contexts. In using the postmodern lyrics of Harryette Mullen as a second major case study, I hope to show that the political aspect of poetry that I'm exploring is not reducible to a certain aspect of form or content in these poems, but is a product of the unique contextual and textual elements that produce these works.

## I. READING FOR POLITICS

Before focusing on the poets, it would be useful to briefly discuss how my readings differ from other famous methods of treating works of literature politically, particularly within the Marxist tradition. For instance, in “The Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth represents but does not give voice to a woman tending crops in a field and singing. She attracts the attention of a man passing by with her singing, who in hearing her, tries to imagine what the feelings she might have could be: “Will no one tell me what she sings?-- / Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow. . .” (803). As he wanders away, her presence has slipped into the past tense (the narrator “saw her singing at her work”), but “The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more,” a memory which presumably leads the reader back to the moment of the poetic present which begins the poem, “Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland Lass!” (803). However, in the poem itself, she is less a subject than the object of the lyric speaker’s musings. She is not present in her own being so much as an object on to which the voice of the poem may project all sorts of melancholic feelings. My point is not to criticize Wordsworth and say that he was writing poetry the wrong way. Instead, I want to use this poem and its method of representation as an example of both a method of representation and a way of reading that I would like to place in opposition to the concepts I find at work in Olson.



Theodor Adorno offers a useful model for a criticism that reveals the politics in a poem that is ostensibly apolitical. In his “Lyric Poetry and Society,” Adorno offers a way of understanding the poem’s ability to address and model the social conditions that lead to the circumstances of its creation. For Adorno, the lyric “anticipates, spiritually, a situation in which no false universality, that is nothing profoundly particular, continues to tether what is other than itself, the human” (*Literature* 38). In other words, lyric poetry, in its best examples, can allow us to glimpse a utopian condition in which the specificity that brings about the conditions of their composition would no longer be the case. These works of art are able to accomplish this task not through their own political posturing, but by the ways in which the lyric’s “self-absorption, its withdrawal into itself, its detachment from the social surface, is socially motivated behind the author’s back” (43). What allows the lyric to express the conditions and undercurrents that Adorno finds so powerful is its function as a sort of sieve for the unmediated personality of the artist, a sieve which inevitably, in the case of great works of art, sorts out a more pure societal condition by virtue of what it points towards by accident. While Adorno’s applications of this method, particularly in the examples he gives at the close of the essay, focus on poems which are already so divorced from the concrete that they break down an ends-based use of language entirely (53), a tactic which will reappear later in the discussion of Language poetry below, it might also be used to read less abstracted texts to find the ways in which more concrete texts work to undo the conditions of their socially-embedded creation. Adorno’s method is admittedly more concerned with ephemeral qualities of language than (what he would term) crude social realities, and it is in Fredric Jameson’s later work, *The Political Unconscious*, that this process is developed and the apparent antinomies heightened into more concrete political lessons, developing on the structural Marxism of thinkers such as Louis Althusser. As Jameson writes:

“the interpretive mission of a properly structural causality will . . . find its privileged content in rifts and discontinuities within the work, and ultimately in a conception of the former ‘work of art’ as a heterogeneous . . . text” (56). In other words, the mission that *The Political Unconscious* sets out to give its readers is that of explaining how the structure of the text itself—and the gaps and ambiguities that make it up—are the main objects of critical attention. The political ramifications of this structural analysis are that these readings, in Christopher Nealon’s apt summary, will show that “heterogeneity in the work of art, even failure, is expressive of the pending problem of there being no obvious successor to the working classes as the engine of history” (25). In other words, disparate elements or contradictions that arise in the form of a work of art—such as why the solitary reaper has to have her perspective mediated through the poetic speaker of Wordsworth’s poem—reveal the ways in which certain insurmountable problems are ever-present, even in ostensibly a-political works of art.

With this process in mind, a second reading of “The Solitary Reaper” could take the poem to be limited by the economic and social conditions that enforce a separation of poetic and physical labor such as that which is exemplified by the poem. The woman (whose gender is itself a limitation in terms of publication) is also a member of the working class—she does not have the time to write poetry; her songs are a way of keeping herself occupied while she does the more literally sustaining work of tending the crops. The very condition that makes her such a wonderful figure for the speaker of the poem, someone who is, in the second stanza, compared not to other singers but birds that have pleased weary travellers, is what deprives her of a speaking voice with which she could articulate her own personhood. In this reading, the poem could be seen to critique its speaker, who subtly betrays his own biases and socioeconomic position as he writes this paean to an unknown woman in a field. Thus, the poem comes to serve

as a critique of the dehumanizing function of the poetic act of creation in the current condition—this wanderer literally objectifies the titular reaper, and can only do so in the current circumstances.

While this process is interesting, and has led to a useful reading of the aforementioned poem, the appeal of the Rancière -inflected reading that I bring to Olson's work is that it emphasizes less the photographic negative of the poem, and more the kinds of positive work that poems can do in terms of their representation. For Rancière, the creation of dissensus comes about via the active inclusion of alternative perspectives and voices that might disrupt the distribution of the sensible—it requires more than the revealing of the limited conditions of the systems of representation currently in place by going beyond the demarcated limits to show their essentially false nature. This is not to say that the kind of Marxist reading that I am making Adorno stand in for (perhaps a little unfairly) is not useful, just that I am attempting with this essay to go beyond its diagnostic temperament. For Jameson and Adorno, the utopian future is gestured at by what the works cannot depict. In contrast to this, I utilize poets such as Olson and the admittedly more lyric Mullen in this piece to explore what it is to look for a positive particularity and political content in literature, a pro-active energy as opposed to a negative closing down under current economic conditions.

## II. RANCIÈRE, INCLUSIVITY AND A DEMOCRATIC MODEL OF POLITICS

The link between Olson and Jacques Rancière becomes apparent at the moment when the division between artist and object, critic and society, comes into question. In this section, I will provide a brief summary of Rancière's thought, laying out an argument for how aesthetic works can enact an expansion of the distribution of the sensible by working in such a way as to question the separation of the aesthetic realm from normal, everyday labor. This separation is crucial to both Rancière's thought and the framework undergirding this essay as the privileged aesthetic space is created by a distribution of labor that has come, historically, to appear more inherent in activities and people than it truly is.

In fact, this questioning is itself the beginning of the disruption of the sensible, as it already problematizes the "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (*Aesthetics* 12). In other words, this distribution is the sum-total of normally perceptible facts under the current political order. This distribution elides those who cannot take part in their own governance, as well as the mechanisms that serve to ensure the continuing existence of the current power structures. Those who are recognized as belonging to the community of citizens are, tautologically, those beings that have "a part in the act of governing and being governed" (12). However, as intimated above, the population of citizens is not equal to the population of the governed. If the entrenched order has the ability to define who

is part of it, if it can define what aspects of life can be included or excluded through representation in the distribution of the sensible, then it can be deduced that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time” (13). The capacity of certain voices to represent themselves, then, is integral to their ability to be present in politics—the process of the division of labor depends upon a population that lacks “the ability to see and the talent to speak.” Elsewhere, Rancière writes, “It is always a polemical distribution of modes of being and ‘occupations’ . . . . It is from this perspective that it is possible to raise the question of the relationship between the ‘ordinariness’ of work and artistic ‘exceptionality’” (42). In other words, the conception of an art/life distinction is inseparable from the establishment of an exclusive political sphere.<sup>1</sup>

However, the aesthetic is also an area where the distribution of the sensible might be challenged, a potential not unrecognized in the history of the analysis of the concept of aesthetic autonomy described above. Rancière locates the origin of the aforementioned art/life split in Plato, who held that that a person’s role in society was inextricable from their essential nature (42). An excellent stonemason would be a terrible carpenter; a superlative carpenter would be an egregious legislator. However, the mimetician (i.e., as Rancière calls the artist as exemplified in Platonic philosophy) disrupts this organization and “brings confusion to this distribution [of

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<sup>1</sup> This can be likened, in the Anglo-analytic philosophical tradition, to W.V.O. Quine’s concept of the “Web of Belief.” For Quine, scientific theories take the available points of sensible data and attempt to construct as complete a web as possible. The superiority of relativity to classical mechanics is due to the former’s ability to more accurately include all the varieties of data that we have collected. This comparison is especially helpful when it comes to the separation of the aesthetic and the political realms of existence. In Quinean terms, the micro- and macro- webs of belief that comprise our knowledge of physics do not cohere—the search for a grand theory of quantum and relativistic mechanics has yet to be satisfactorily concluded. Likewise, for Rancière, while there might be overlapping distributions going on in any particular discussion of aesthetics and politics, the two are not necessarily reducible. In dealing with the interactions between these two realms, one has recognize that, although they certainly interact, it is not a simple causal relationship.

labor]: he is a man of duplication, a worker who does two things at once . . . He sets up a stage for what is common to the community with what should determine the confinement of each person to his or her place” (43). The aesthetic act of the mimetician<sup>2</sup> gives the lie to the idea that the division of labor is inherent in the idea of a community and the individuals that make it up by using components already inherent in the current order—the acts that they can undertake need not be limited by the conception of an innate “nature” governing this particular distribution of the sensible. Of course, across time and under different schemes of government, the philosophical underpinnings of this distribution change, but the result of this segregating principle—as Olson laments—leave the aesthetic worker separate from the figures represented within works of art. However, the aesthetic act itself, as Rancière concludes in his essay “On Work and Art,” serves to close this gap: “Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not ‘exceptions to other practices.’ They represent and reconfigure the distribution of these activities” (45).<sup>3</sup> While perhaps not directly in sync with Olson’s account of our alienation from our labor and society at large, Rancière’s argument brings to light what is at stake in *The Maximus Poems*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This essay is not arguing that poetry has a privileged place among the arts, and so is uniquely capable of disrupting the distribution imposed by a globalized capitalism. Instead, it analyzes how a certain form of disruption can be found in a certain kind of poetry that I am loosely grouping under the name “avant-garde.”

<sup>3</sup> Though I do not mention it above, Rancière’s conception of the aesthetic regime of art is important to mention in order to do justice to his project. According to Rancière, the aesthetic regime is the latest way in which artistic works are positioned with respect to society as a whole (*Aesthetics* 81). In this position, art has come to question its distance from other activities of life, allowing works such as Whitman’s or Olson’s to attempt their democratic projects in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that unlike Olson, Rancière himself denies that his theory involves a concept of “alienation.” He writes, “For me, politics is not the expression of an originary living subjectivity that stands in opposition to another, originary mode of subjectivity—nor to any kind of derived or hijacked mode, as in theories of alienation” (*Dissensus* 91). However, elsewhere in an essay collected with the same book he also thinks “the full implementation of freedom and equality entails re-unifying the various forms of collective intelligence into one and the same form of sensory experience (81). What is this rift but an alienation from our innate capacities by the social forces embodied by the police? We need not have ever been unalienated in the past to be alienated at present. If there is no originary or (to use a better word) ideal condition then what does it mean to be re-unified? What

In his recent book, *Aisthesis*, Rancière considers the example of another American poet of democratic inclusivity, Walt Whitman, writing, “[his name] appears only once in the body of the text [“Song of Myself”]—that is to say, at once in its center and lost within its mass” (69). For Rancière, Whitman embodies the democratic potentiality of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s remarks on the topic of the ideal poet of the young nation, and so “Song of Myself” is notable in that it is an affirmation of a “universal intellectual capacity.” It demonstrates that the possibilities of the poetic act can reproduce, in its style, the plethora of identities that compose a community, of which the poet is only one voice among many. What it does not do, however, is produce these identities in their difference from the Whitmanian “I” that narrates the poem. While “for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman 84), there is no mistaking the fact that the poet-figure in Whitman has ordered and composed the various “I”s that the voice of the poem inhabits.

This is not to say that Whitman is somehow less inclusive or less democratic than Olson—the body of criticism on the former is so vast and intelligent that I am at a loss to make such a strong claim with any confidence—but that the Whitmanian “I” is a character in its own right. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s attempt to depict and embody the whole of the young nation imbues his narrator with a unique ontological position. Oftentimes, he does this through a kind of cataloguing, ranging across class and race to depict people as they are, paratactically layering each next to the other to create a vision of democratic plurality. For example, in section fifteen, the roving eye of the poem moves from “the pure contralto [who] sings in the organ loft” to “the lunatic [who] is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case” as well as “the prostitute [who] draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck” (93-95). Beginning

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condition is being returned to; what split is being fixed? This may be too small a point to devote the amount of space to it that I am, but clearing up this inconsistency is important to my utilization of Rancière.

with the image of the singer, who we might understand to stand in metonymically for Whitman's own persona, though his is more a "barbaric yawp" than sweet music, the poem then moves through glimpses of other lives, before tying them together with the section's concluding remarks: "And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / and such as it is to be of these more or less I am" (96). For the first time in the section, Whitman uses the conjunction ("and"), and, in doing so, links all of what has come to the argument that each person depicted has as much a right and place in the Whitmanian self as any other—that they are all somehow unified and distinct.

From one perspective, this is a much more pluralistic conception of a culture than anything we might find in Olson. As I noted in the introduction to this section, Olson's depictions of women, when they infrequently appear, hardly capture any variety, as above, or interiority, as in section 11, with its twenty-ninth bather who watches young men from afar with inarticulate desire (articulated, paradoxically, by the poem itself). Moreover, Whitman certainly engages with the country's racial past more than Olson does in his explorations of the predominantly white Gloucester—nor does Olson ever extensively meditate on his relationship to the Mayan culture, which is so fruitful for his overall conception of ideal living. However, it can be said that, in terms of the form of "Song of Myself," these other positions and persons are all filtered through the Whitmanian persona. As Betsy Erkkila notes, "For all their poetic democracy, Whitman's catalogues could operate paradoxically as a kind of formal tyranny, muting the fact of inequality, race conflict, and radical difference within a rhetorical economy of man and one" (*Whitman the Political Poet* 102). However, for Erkkila, Whitman's "'multitudes' of contradiction disrupt the harmonious democratic order that he enunciates and seeks to achieve stylistically by assonance and consonance, alliteration and internal rhyme, parallelism and



repetition” (102). In other words, Whitman’s famous allowance for contradictions allow the leveling aspect of his presentation as described above to only *appear* to willfully disguise via form the differences between the individuals depicted. Erkkila, however, never quite explains how this is so—she goes on to explain that this undercurrent of tumultuousness arises from Whitman’s “kosmos”-ian personality traits, that he “is both single and multiple, common man and en masse, American and kosmos” (102). And, in identifying himself elsewhere as “one of the roughs,” Erkkila is to have the reader understand that Whitman “refuses decorum, hierarchy, and stock sentiment as both life-style and literary style” (102). Yet however fleshy Whitman’s own persona in the poem might be, the issue of the catalogue that Erkkila herself articulated remains. In turning to a few moments within “Song of Myself” where Whitman articulates his persona, it is possible to understand how the poem privileges the Whitmanian persona and its raised status within the poem.

Whitman himself emphasizes his role in sorting through the morass of public life in certain moments throughout the poem. As he writes in section 24 of “Song of Myself,” the voice of the poem serves as a conduit for others and more ephemeral qualities:

*Through me* [emphasis mine] many long dumb voices,

Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,

[. . .]

And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the father stuff,

And of the rights of them the others are down upon,

Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised (102)

Whitman ventriloquizes and serves as a conduit for the multitudes that make up the country, from the concrete “slaves” down to more metaphysical and vague “rights of them the

others are down upon,” thus serving as a model for a democratic existence that the reader can follow. That it must take place through Whitman is made clear in an introductory section of the work, as Whitman enjoins his reader to sit by him a while, and listen: “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems . . .” (85). And, while the reader will not “look through my [Whitman’s] eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (85). These lines tell us that the reader, after having spent some time with Whitman, will be able to filter and understand the world for herself; but, it seems, only after. This knowledge of the world will come from a specific point of view, and a specific opening up to the world. You will see the world through no one else’s eyes, but let Whitman show you how your eyes work. The inclusivity of the democracy Whitman shows us always and only comes through Whitman—neither the reader nor the depicted people have a say in their ultimate experience of the America depicted in “Song of Myself.”

Ultimately, the Whitmanian persona is located rhetorically both above and also as the dialectical end-point for both the reader and the peoples that he depicts. Thus, the cataloguing style should not be brushed off, as Erkkila tends to, as a moment of misleading homogeneity, because that homogeneity is precisely the form through which Whitman has to articulate the rest of the society that has yet to reach that status of a “being which contains multitudes.” The poet at the center of “Song of Myself” is the end-goal of the poem—it implicitly rejects an interiority or circumstance that would not align itself with this process. In fact, it does not seem so much a stretch to say that Whitman’s democratic inclusivity is, upon close reading, a form of consensus that Rancière would do well to reject. As such, it appears reasonable to claim that Olson’s tendency in the sections of *The Maximus Poems* that I engage in this essay, gives us a very different image of what democratic inclusivity in the context of poetic form could be. While

Olson is not immune to the criticism outlined above—one might complain that this essay presumes a curatorial presence behind Maximus that is guilty of using the same kind of didactic processes for which I indict Whitman—he, by allowing these alternate voices into the poem at least is able to avoid the cataloguing sameness inherent in the Whitmanian style. *The Maximus Poems* benefit from the fact that their form is as varied as their contents. Additionally, if Olson (and later Mullen) can be said to develop the Whitmanian exploration of the democratic potential of poetry in the dissensual spaces opened up by their poetry, it is insofar as they, in moving beyond the Whitmanian-singular poetic speaker, also begin to move beyond the separation of aesthetic activities and other forms of life. After all, in Whitman's catalogues, many jobs are depicted, but notably not that of the poet, who, in cataloguing is given a privileged (or at least differentiated) position with respect to those that he depicts.

### III. WRITING POETRY AND HEARING THE WORLD

For Charles Olson, and other poets of the 1950s, particularly those of the Black Mountain School whose artistic beliefs solidified in the aftermath of World War Two, the horrors of totalitarianism, the political state of the nascent cold war, and the post-war economic boom together created a milieu in which some alternative demanded to be imagined (Voyce 29). The political situation of the time, in particular, did much to turn Olson off to the normal authority of state power because he was greatly disturbed by visits from the FBI in 1952 (Clark 218-219). As his biographer notes, “After a second round of questioning he was left alone, but in psychic terms the damage had already been done. Following these ominous events Olson would be forever vigilant to the point of paranoia about the invasive authority of state power.” Additionally, the world-historical events of the past decade had done much to solidify the ethical ramifications of his aesthetic choices. If, as Adorno famously said, to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, poets such as Charles Olson grappled with the impulse to represent the barbarity that had occurred in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Olson’s early poem “La Preface” (1946) images of catastrophe crowd out sentimentalized moments of beauty in order to be true to what has occurred: “We are the new born, and there are no flowers. / Document means that there are no flowers . . .” (*Collected* 47). The implication is that mere beauty is not enough—poetry’s social purpose, especially after what has come before, is especially pressing,

and so should attempt to do more, embody more than art divorced from the material history of its creators.

If “Letter 5” explores how the relationship between poetry and labor has been corrupted, then Olson’s essay “The Human Universe” (1951) offers an alternative. In this essay, Olson contrasts contemporary American society with the Maya, who he had researched for a period of time in the early 1950s, searching for a society in which its members are not alienated from their daily existence. This is not an easy task, but he believes that modern society works in such a way as to leave its inhabitants ill-prepared to handle the burden. He writes that

For the truth is, that the management of external nature so that none of its virtu is lost, in vegetables or in art, is as much a delicate juggling of her content as is the same juggling by any one of us of our own. And when men are not such jugglers, are not able to manage a means of expression the equal of their own or nature’s intricacy, the flesh does choke. The notion of fun comes to displace work as what we are here for. Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture. (*Collected Prose* 159)

The external nature referenced in this passage is literally the world external to us—Western man, for Olson, no longer has the ability to adequately engage with the objects of the world; he derisively refers to the grocery store and the ills that “irrigated lettuce and their green-picked refrigerator-ripened fruit” in the sentence immediately preceding the section quoted above. This distance from the material aspects of our world has left us in a position where we have become alienated from the world and our laboring in it, and this is where we have become victims of what he terms “Spectatorism.” As a consequence of this, passivity chokes contemporary life, creating a mass of people that cannot participate in their own culture or governance. A new sort

of engagement must be inculcated in order to prevent “Spectatorism” from totally subsuming the individual.

A concrete symptom of this disease is characterized in the poem “for Robert Duncan,/ who understands/what’s going on/--written because of him [sic]” (1961) In this piece, Maximus describes a world in which corporate images have replaced an individual’s knowledge of his or her own reality:

Bayliss . . . suggested  
to her husband Gorton’s have an aquarium  
to show what fish look like – or it was already said  
it won’t be long, with fish sticks, pictures  
will be necessary on the covers of the TV dinners  
to let children know that mackerel is a different  
looking thing than herrings (*Maximus* 209)

Olson ironizes the way in which the mass-produced culture of post-war America educates children about the world while simultaneously erasing its variety and texture. Though one could potentially go to the company aquarium from which the artist may have drawn his inspiration, or consult the picture on the box, the physical reality of the fish now only comes out in the form of bland, brown, and rectangular fish sticks. The natural world and our knowledge of it are reduced to its representation while we lose touch with things as they actually are.

Likewise, an earlier poem, entitled “Songs of Maximus” (1953), depicts the effects of this culture on the individual, yet this piece also offers a potential solution. Broken into six parts, it demonstrates the phenomenological toll enacted psychologically by this alienation from the

objects that comprise modern life: “No eyes or ears left / to their own doings (all / invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses / including the mind, that worker on what is” (*Maximus* 17).

The image is that of a man drowning in (and drowned out by) the sounds of his society—his senses are “outraged” by stimuli over which he has no control. The body’s sense organs, i.e. our closest connection to the material world, have been “invaded, appropriated, outraged” by the cacophony, which can only have a deleterious effect on man’s sense of his role within this reality. As Maximus reminds the reader, the mind, “that worker on what is,” is also at the mercy of those rude stimuli. The poem from which this excerpt is taken, however, remains hopeful. The sixth and final song is comprised of three lines: “you sing, you / who also / wants” (21). The poem critiques (in a perhaps curmudgeonly manner) contemporary society, while also imploring “you” to begin to sing, or, in other words, to become a noisy object in “your” own right, replacing passive submission to the cacophony with the creative act of singing.

Olson expands on the role that poetry might play in ameliorating this situation in his famous manifesto, “Projective Verse” (1950). This essay, in which Olson cites Pound and Williams as his true forebears, lays out how poetry should be written and what processes should go into it, and ends with a note explaining how this method of poetic composition will have practical effects on the world at large. For Olson, verse should be written in such a way as to be “open” as opposed to “closed.” The former is opposed to the latter, or “as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the ‘old’ base of the non-projective” (239). The key words in this quote are “over-all” and the already-in-quotes “old.” By “over-all,” Olson refers to forms like sonnets or sestinas, or verse forms that precede the actual content of the piece. This is opposed to something like Olson’s work, or the later work of Ezra Pound, when, in his *Cantos*, the free verse has been given control to go wherever it wants on the page, and to scan however it

wants to the ear. The use of the word “old” in this quotation is interesting because Olson is using it consciously. Obviously he is aware of Pound’s injunction to “Make it new,” but he is equally aware of how old that very injunction is even in its Poundian context.<sup>5</sup> This is an especially odd thing for Olson to believe given that so much of his work derives from historical archives and voices (a topic given more attention later on in this essay), and that so much of his work and thought about poetry owes much to his predecessors. Given this, it makes sense that old should be read more as staid or unthinking—closed off to the potentials of content.

This leads us now to Olson’s positive definitions of “open” verse. “Open” verse, for Olson, is that which follows from three rules. First, and perhaps most importantly, it must be kinetic, meaning that it must act in such a way that a certain energy will transfer from the source of the poem (its inspiration and poet), to the poem itself, to the reader, and at all points working to continue this cycle. Second, “form is never more than the extension of content” (*Prose* 240), meaning that the restrictions that dampen the closed form—its priorities of form—do not harm the content the poet is trying to kinetically transfer. Finally, this process should move quickly between perceptions, being grounded more in the world and phenomenological experience of it than interiority of the poetic speaker, as Olson will delve into later.

It is worth noting at this point that, in terms of form, Olson’s debt to his predecessors is such that a major criticism of his work is that it is *too* indebted. Marjorie Perloff, in her excoriating essay “Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors,’” makes clear how strong the relationship between the two poets truly is. Despite Olson’s later denials of Pound’s influence, the content of “Projective Verse” is lifted from the writings of his two acknowledged

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<sup>5</sup> In Canto LIII, Pound locates his famous command to “MAKE IT NEW” on the side of an ancient Chinese ruler’s bathtub (*Selected* 196), both ironizing the central claim while also making it clear that Pound’s own goals are in line with the great men of history in contrast to Olson’s identification with fishermen, a contrast explored further below.



predecessors. As she points out, the “tripartite division” of projective verse (kinetics, principle, and process) has its source in sections of Pound’s *ABC of Reading* as well other assorted writings of Pound and Williams (291). Perhaps even more damning for Perloff is Olson’s claim that he is free from Pound’s influence while in the same letter using the older poet’s idiosyncratic style (296-297). Perloff writes, “*Mayan Letters* like ‘Projective Verse,’ with its typographical spacings, its juxtapositions of lower-case letters, capitals and italics, its abbreviations and phonetic spellings, and its peculiar blend of slang and elevated diction, could not have been written without the Pound model” (297). Whether or not one shares Perloff’s opprobrium at the level of influence extant in the younger poet’s work, Olson’s debt to Pound is clear.<sup>6</sup>

From these principles, Olson moves to the more idiosyncratic and materialist idea in “Projective Verse,” namely his invocation of the “breath” and the “ear.” Both break down, respectively, on to the page as the “line” and the “syllable” (*Prose* 243). The line is related explicitly to the body of the composer, mediated by the body and the breath, and, interestingly for my purposes, is rhetorically aligned with labor. Olson writes,

And the line comes . . . from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination. (*Prose* 242)

This long sentence is written in such a way as to emphasize its own point—Olson’s overuse of commas calls attention to the pacing of the sentence (slowing it down, in effect) while drawing his reader’s attention to the ways in which writing can be paced to emphasize aspects of the

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<sup>6</sup> It should be pointed out that the degree to which Olson’s open form poetics is a development on the work of his antecedents or a stylistic theft is not a settled question among critics. For example, Stephen Voyle’s *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* devotes a chapter to exploring how women writers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century utilize open form in their writings (32).

content via form. The development of this skill is portrayed as a form of labor—"the daily work, the WORK"—calls attention to the link between the act of writing as a job and the synonym for the piece produced. Olson, therefore, would never write something like the gleeful rejection of work that concludes Pound's "Salutation the Second": "But, above all, go to practical people— / go! Jangle their door-bells! / Say that you do no work / and that you will live forever" (38). Olson's relationship to writing is the obverse of this; writing is a form of work, and work is what is produced through writing.

The other side of this equation of poetic creation is the ear, which is the way in which the sounds of the world are experienced, and reflects the play of the mind as it is experienced and exhibited by the poetic composer. This, like the breath, is emphatically not the product of idle reading but is a full time job. Olson writes, "Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price" (*Prose* 242). This is also where the energy that the poet is ostensibly supposed to capture is let in. This labor will yield an understanding of the sound of language and also sources for writing—the first section of "The Kingfishers," after all, fragments and dramatizes snatches of conversation overheard at a party before moving on to more arcane topics. The importance of this openness to the outside informs the careful reader of Olson as to the horror of the overwhelming sound depicted in the "Songs of Maximus." It is what divorces a person from his creative potential in the first place—modernity literally supplanting the sounds and listening of individuals.

Through the "line" and the "syllable" the poet is able to achieve the transfer mentioned above, and has the ability to give the poem a kind of charge that gives it a "solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things" (*Prose* 244), and this feeling of reality is what

allows the poems to take on a practical dimension with respect to the ways in which they can change the material world. In the second section of the essay, Olson discusses how these object-like poems can lead to what he calls “Objectism” (*Prose* 247). Olson distinguishes his “objectism” from the “objectivism” of Williams and Pound as a difference of degree. Where “objectivism” was a refusal of “subjectivism” and a dedication to a more real image of the world in poems, “objectism” sets out to get

rid of the lyrical<sup>7</sup> interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.  
(*Prose* 247)

In other words, “objectism” sets out to eliminate the split between the poetic subject and those objects of his perception, to return to a condition in which man is no longer alienated from the world by virtue of his special condition of being a human being. The “lyrical interference” prevents man from truly experiencing the world, and in being unable to experience the world, he is unable to write poetry of value. Olson does not go on to explain why this relationship is better than the one mediated by the “lyrical interference,” but in making his derogatory feelings about

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<sup>7</sup> Olson describes himself as non-lyrical, but is he? After all, the “Songs of Maximus” are by definition composed of lyrics, and they, out of the context of *Maximus* itself would probably be considered lyric to the untrained eye. It isn’t even clear if the modernist long poem, exemplified here by *The Maximus Poems*, are not lyrical—after all, no less a critic than Northrop Frye refers to Pound’s “lyricized epic verse.” While debates about the lyric tradition are a major source of contention among scholars of poetry today (c.f., Virginia Jackson and Jonathan Culler), this essay will avoid engaging with it for the simple reason that whether or not Olson or Mullen wrote lyric poems, their poetry is still emblematic of the political relationship that I described above.

this dichotomy clear, the reader is in a better position to understand Olson's relationship to the world, to the people and materials that he draws from in composing his poems. Above all, whether metaphysically or politically, the poet should not stand apart nor stand above the objects of the poem.

Olson, of course, was not unique in rejecting the ills of modernity; many of his modernist forebears were equally suspicious of the world coming into being. Understanding Olson's relationship to modernism helps situate his theory of alienation, with its particular origins, in line with his poetic goals. Citing Perry Anderson, Fredric Jameson writes that the fundamental similarity among the modernists was their distaste for the dictates of the current capitalist market system; conversely the postmodernists "share[d] a resonant affirmation, if not an outright celebration, of the market as such" (305). This may not be a universally true statement, but this description of modernism contra postmodernism usefully highlights how Olson belongs fundamentally to the former group and not the latter. Beneath the current market-driven culture, there is a more meaningful condition waiting to be discovered. As the above discussion of "Human Universe" indicated, Olson's poetics intend to initiate a return to an unalienated reality. He ultimately believes that there is a truth with which contact may be reestablished. As such, Olson's work should be viewed as a response to the formal project initiated by Ezra Pound, the former's major influence, rather than a rejection or transcendence of it. Understanding the specifically populist objection Olson has for Pound's utilization of history highlights how the former's poetics attempt to move beyond the mastery that characterized the latter's relationship to the content of his *Cantos*.

According to Charles Altieri's account of the period in *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, the "new realists," as he categorizes early modernists such as Pound and

William Carlos Williams, attempted to break away from what they saw as the inadequate rhetoric which characterized the literature of the fin de siècle West and replace it with a new method that used the “capacity of juxtaposition to hold together the poem’s subtle and diffuse sensations, [in which] coherence depends completely on the agency that confers distinctive aesthetic form on these materials” (103). For example, Pound’s famous poem, “In the Station of the Metro,” depends upon the specific lyric subject that observes and organizes *specific* images. However, as Altieri goes on to say, these poets ran into difficulty when attempting to apply this style of writing to the world at large, a goal that was felt to be important in light of the social and political upheavals that characterized the second decade of the twentieth century onward. Olson, whose work grappled with this dilemma, is not, like those original modernists, enacting a radical break with the immediate literary past; rather, he attempts to write poetry that recasts the developments of earlier poets in such a way as to make their techniques socially viable. Olson was aware of the risk inherent in a poetics built upon the lyric speaker’s personal subjectivity,<sup>8</sup> and strove to develop his own poetics in such a way as to move beyond it.

In Olson’s mind, Pound was able to achieve a kind of leveling in his *Cantos*—i.e. he was able to bring all the materials, references, and sources under his control—because “his single emotion breaks all down to his equals or inferiors” (*Selected* 81). Through this emotion, which Olson calls Pound’s “ego-beak,” he succeeded in destroying “historical time,” releasing the previously bound objects into the “space” and “air,” into a condition in which they could be used to construct something new. Yet Pound limited himself with his material of choice, as well as his

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in “Human Universe,” he writes of a thesis that it “is not easy to save [it] from subjectivism, to state [it] so that you understand that this is not an observation but a first law to a restoration of the human house” (*Collected* 158). This kind of a priori basis meant that his argument had a security that gave it more force than mere anecdote—it would be true beyond Olson’s own perspective. It was crucial to Olson that his thoughts were not merely applicable to himself, but were true of everyone who might read his work, so that the advice and guidance that he sought to offer would have actual applicability in the world.

need to overwhelm it; he is the superior figure demanding the acquiescence of his selections to his own voice. As Olson put it in another essay: “He does not seem to have inhabited his own experience” (146). This reading of Pound is true particularly of the first of the *Cantos*. This poem begins as a retelling of the Odyssey, depicted in media res with the conjunctive “And then went down the ship . . .” (127), which, in opening Pound’s opus, informs the reader that she has entered temporally into the middle of tale being told. This temporal dizziness is deepened by the revelation (or perhaps frustration) that concludes the poem: “Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officinal Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer” (128). Divus was a renaissance translator of Homer; Pound is acknowledging the debt to a lineage that includes centuries of intervening texts, a story and history that he cannily announces his involvement in by giving his own rendition of Homer—in sum, the in media res quality of Canto I’s content (the Homeric story of Odysseus) is shared by its simultaneous occurrence in the middle of a literary history. However, this brilliant introduction is emblematic of the differences in the temperaments of the two poets—Pound addresses himself to scholars and readers of literary history, announcing his own part in it. Olson’s work speaks to the *polis* of Gloucester and the everyday concerns of life. Where Pound’s work is concerned, above all, with the aesthetic, Olson’s work chafes at the limitations of that very category.

Olson’s relationship to Pound is more important to Olson’s presentation of himself (in the sense of what he positions himself as *not* being) than is his relationship with Williams. This is the result of the different relationships that Olson had with the two poets. Olson renounced Pound as a friend after the latter disparaged Williams’ race, and never reconnected with him afterwards (Clark 132-133). On the other hand, Olson and Williams shared a relatively close relationship for as long as they knew each other; Williams even reprinted large swaths of

“Projective Verse” in his *Autobiography*. While claiming that “Projective Verse” explains the poetic principles of *Spring and All* would be deeply anachronistic, it is fair to say that Olson and Williams shared certain ideas about how poetry should function, and how poets should practice. In the “Author’s Introduction” to his 1944 collection *The Wedge*, Williams gives the reader an account of poetry as a machine with inputs and outputs which bears a marked similarity to Olson’s own account of energy given off by poems and energy gained by the audience. In the course of explaining how poems are conduits for other concerns, but merely conduits, he writes, “To make two bald statements: There’s nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there’s nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant” (256). Similar to Olson’s conception of “projective” poetry as a carrier of energy made viable by the proper construction and compositional features on the poet’s part, Williams (not too long beforehand) gives his readers a conception of the poem as a carrier of information whose success depends on its material and practical soundness. Finally Williams’ own biography, with his deeply American roots (after all he wrote *Paterson*, as well as dodged the “modernist in exile” trope) and doctoral practice, make him a less obvious aesthetic foil for the equally American and work-idealizing Olson.

In moving beyond Pound, Olson identifies the useful material for his poems not in the masterworks of literature. Instead, as Olson tells Robert Creeley, “the substances of history [which are] now useful lie outside, under, right here, anywhere but in the direct continuum of society as we have had it (of the State, same, of the Economy, same, of the Politicks [sic] . . . ) (84). The solution will be outside of those sources typically represented by power, propped up as exemplars by the dominant culture, to be found within heretofore overlooked histories. Olson’s

commitment to including (and not overwhelming) these alternative sources is evident from the speed with which the character of Maximus puts his own “ego-beak” away in between the first and second letters (i.e. poems) of the book. “*I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You*” introduces to the reader to the narrator, who proclaims, “I, Maximus / a metal hot from boiling water, tell you / what is a lance, who obeys the figures of / the present dance” (5). Maximus enters the poem, directly addressing the reader, and prepares his audience for the learning he is about to impart. Conversely, the Maximus of the second poem has already begun to doubt the importance of his lessons: “. . . . [sic] tell you? ha! Who/ can tell another how to manage the swimming?” (9). In an abrupt switch, Maximus abnegates his didactic role—he implies that the didactic pose is just that. The figure of Maximus admits that he may occasionally have to step aside, allowing more knowledgeable voices to take over; the sound of his language, having abandoned the sonorous consonance of the first poem, bears this out. The leveling of the speaker rather than the material disrupts the primacy of “ego-position.” If Pound sought to “outtalk” his equals, then Olson allows that the general chorus of Gloucester might rightly subsume his proxy within *The Maximus Poems*.

If, like Whitman in “Song of Myself,” Olson’s project enacts a process in which a community is newly brought into being, then the Language poet Barrett Watten’s analysis of Olson in his book, *Total Syntax*, identifies the relationship between the form of the text and the building of its particular *polis*. To do so, Watten utilizes Roman Jakobson’s “principle of equivalence” to demonstrate how the poet renders “divided subject matter and literary forms into units” that can be fruitfully combined to yield the resultant poetic meaning (125). A little later in the same essay, Watten discusses how this principle is crucial to the concept of the *polis* in Olson’s work:



there is no *polis* in Olson's work. . . Rather, any actual *polis* is exploded and dispersed by the act of the poem. This displacement argues of necessity a psychologically elaborate topography in which persons, places and things enter in a kind of "dream time" [i.e. the subjective experience that the speaker imparts on the poem]. . . The elaboration of this topographical modality is a motivation for the "principle of equivalence" in the poem. There is no cultural or structural "bottom line;" this is the primary source of the linguistic density of the work. (Watten 127)

While I agree with Watten that the *polis* cannot yet be found within *The Maximus Poems*, I disagree that the work actively disperses it. The missing "bottom line" is not evidence of an actively dissolved *polis*, but one that is in the process of becoming. The political for Rancière has the same immanent quality. As Rancière writes, the "essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement [of the distribution of the sensible] by supplementing it with the part of those without part, identified with the whole community" (*Dissensus* 36). In other words, politics is the process of achieving a disturbance that would entail the recognition of the part of the community excluded from governing, and, in recognizing this part, bringing it into the fold as a segment of population capable of partaking in the act of governing. The *polis* is created by this capacity for political action. This idea of process is also central to Olson's alternative as he outlines it in "Human Universe," when he denigrates the freezing power of the categorizing instinct. He argues, "There must be a way which bears *in* instead of away . . . a way which does not—in order to define—prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of discovering" (158). This process of enacting the *polis* prevents it from solidifying back into those who are included and those who are not. The resumption of this binary would lead back to the passivity that he finds so abhorrent. If it did become reified, it would not coalesce into a finalized *polis* but announce a return to a

passive condition. Olson's *polis* and Rancière's theory of politics align in that they explore the conditions under which the current regime can be disrupted via poetic interventions into the staid, hierarchical forms of discourse that pervades both contemporary society and, as was castigated by the vitriolic "Letter 5," the wrong sorts of poetry.

#### IV. GLOUCESTER AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

This conception of politics is evident in two of the ostensibly least political (or lyric) poems in the book, “Letter on Georges” and “[Second Letter on Georges].” Though the latter is more explicitly in line with experimental formatting that characterizes much of Olson’s work, these poems, through their extended use of quotation to the exclusion of Olson’s own Maximus persona, are significant for their resolutely non-verse presentation. For this, they are an instance in which *The Maximus Poems* give the “you” of the aforementioned final section of “The Songs of Maximus” a space in which “you” can sing.

Before discussing the content of the poems themselves, attention should be first paid to the generic implications of their titles. First, they remain “letters,” the most common name for the missives sent by Maximus. That these poems are assigned the epistolary format—rather than that of an aside or some other extra-poetic inclusion—signifies their importance to the work as a whole. Additionally, the form of the letter is one that necessitates a correspondent. If Maximus sings to the “you / who also / wants,” the voices of these letters reach out similarly to a community of their own. Second, although the names of these poems refer to a dangerous bank near the town of Gloucester, as George Butterick points out (195), this title recalls the poetic genre of the georgic, which (from its namesake, Virgil’s *Georgics* onwards) “offers a complex meditation on the affinities and differences between the tending of words and the culture of the ground” (Goodman 556). Olson’s Georges poems, however, do not explicitly explore this theme

so much as rely on the reader to understand, partly through their placement within the *Poems* and partly through an understanding of Olson's own poetics, that the non-poetic utterance of the storyteller denotes the way in which the clash between the lyric beginning and the narrative body signals a similar exploration through an enactment of the "principle of equivalence."

Maximus introduces "Letter on Georges" with a few short lines of verse that are meant to warn the reader of the year-round danger of sailing along this stretch of the coast: "February night, or August / on Georges the seas / are short, the room's / small" (140). Although the contraction in this section ("room's") reflects an informal tone commonly used throughout *Maximus*, Maximus' presence, come to "tell you" of the local dangers, indicates the didactic impression intended by these lines. However, Maximus then disappears from the poem, allowing a fisherman, who had actually sailed this treacherous point, to offer a concrete example for the reader to follow. The poem switches from Maximus' verse to a fisherman's prose, quoting extensively from an article that Olson had found in *The Fishermen's Memorial and the Record Book* (Butterick 194). The method of organization becomes the paragraph rather than the stanza; the didactic warnings become descriptive prose. Here is one representative passage: "At midnight the tide itself changed, set toward shoalwater, and now the wind, the sea and the tide were in one movement from the northeast, and the gravest strain was put on all the vessels trying to ride out the night" (141). An active, lived experience replaces the hectoring lessons of Maximus. The poem ends with the return of Maximus' voice, but his role is reduced to merely contextualizing the narrative in a specific place, "The shoal of Georges/ the north, west, and south" (142). The poem's conclusion pokes fun at itself—Maximus' vague, verse pronouncements are, comparatively, of little use against the actual account of someone who has

traversed the dangerous area. The accumulated body of a local, vernacular history as exemplified by the quoted story trumps the pretensions of the didactic *Maximus*.

In the “[Second Letter on Georges],” Olson tells a similar story, using a more experimental presentation to incorporate a varied group of sources rather than give a simple narrative account. As the title suggests, this journey passed through the same part of the coast, but, instead of an old account from an archaic record book, the poet gathers the voices of fishermen that Olson had known while he had lived in Gloucester (Butterick 195-196). In this poem, the connection of the fishermen to the broader context of *Maximus* becomes more pronounced. As Butterick notes, one of the speakers on this page is referenced earlier in a poem entitled “Letter 2” (196). He is one of the fishermen whose stories Olson had heard about town: “Or the quiet one, who’s died since (died as deck-watchman, on his vessel, in port)” (10), and he has now gone from poetic object to a singing subject in his own right. This speaker is supplemented by the voices of two other fishermen who had witnessed the events recounted, as well as Olson’s biographical notes on the conversation’s participants. The presentation of this mess of material is emblematic of Olson’s attempt to not only represent an active *polis* but to include the reader in its instantiation. By presenting the reader with this confluence of contrasting speakers and narratives, Olson enables the fishermen to retain their identity in the *polis* that Olson creates in this poem, preventing any one voice from overwhelming the others. Passivity and mere consensus are prevented by this structure; instead, an active, and therefore political, relationship to the material is established.

Yet these poems also raise questions with respect to Olson’s relationship to his own theoretical essays. After all, part of Olson’s own argument for his writings is the way in which good, energy transferring poetry is located in the body of their speaker. However, many of the

Maximus poems, including and especially the two discussed above, are dependent upon sources independent of Olson entirely: an archive, a material object as it is replicated by Olson, not the original speaker. How can Olson espouse a “projective” poetics when these poems come from neither his own voice nor the voices of the people he is quoting? It would appear that a fair objection could be made, that the poem sits uneasily on top of Olson’s written poetics elsewhere. However, Olson’s opening characterization of projective verse is more malleable than the rest of the essay makes it appear. Verse must “catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes *as well as of his listenings* [emphasis mine]” (*Prose* 239). In my understanding of this line, the writer of verse is signified as someone who is being acted upon similarly by outside givers of energy. The verse being written must not only represent the voice of the speaker, but also the voices that have successfully gotten through to the speaker through their own telling. And this differs from the problem of the “inherited” because the producers of the accounts above are not engaged in the institutional poetic practice against which “composition by field” defines itself. Also, if “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN THE EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (*Prose* 240), then it follows that the form of a represented community on the page should resemble the content of the community from which it springs. In the case of the “[2<sup>nd</sup> Letter on Georges],” this means that the form of the poem, and its reliance on direct quotation, are an extension of the *polis* that it ostensibly is attempting to model. It needs to appear this way because this is the import of its content; a more organized form on the page would erase the ways in which the participants in the conversation interrupt, contradict, and generally enact a community. Admittedly, there are inconsistencies with the pronouncements of the essay and the poems that Olson would eventually write—after all, copying a letter, as in the “1<sup>st</sup> Letter on Georges” is in no way the instantaneous transfer of energy newly allowed and

mandated by the existence of the typewriter (246); however, the poems and the poetics are not exactly contradictory either.

Unfortunately, while there is a “3<sup>rd</sup> *Letter on Georges, unwritten*,” the later poem fails to evince the same special qualities that make the other two fascinating examples of departures from an overwhelming poetic voice. Where the earlier poems (both from the first book of *The Maximus Poems*) rely on the accounts and voices of real fishermen, whether from the historical record or Olson’s own acquaintances, the final poem is a fictionalized account of a journey in that area. It is written in a bracketed prose, emphasizing, like many of the poems in this middle book, its unfinished, note-like quality, and begins, “[ In this place is a poem which I have not been able to write—or a story to be called the Eastern End of George, about a captain I knew about . . .” (277). Olson goes on to describe, in rough form, what this story would entail and what feeling it would invoke—a “sense here, of this fellow going home”—and in turn allows for two possible readings of this piece: both as slyly finished “note” (i.e., as something which is in its finished state) or as the note towards a poem that it pretends to be. In the former case, it then becomes a document of Olson’s own process, especially when it, in the second half, devolves into complaints about the struggle to find the appropriate historical sources: “. . . for I’ve looked & looked for the verification, and the details of sail at a time when there were no engines—and I went to James Connolly expecting to be able to depend upon him . . .” (207). In fact, the anapestic composition of the line, “and the details of sail at a time when there were no engines,” does imply that there is definite poetic purpose and control underlying this portion, giving credence to the reading of this note as a finished “note.” However, if this reading of the poem as a commentary is correct, then the multi-vocal process that I have highlighted as being worked out in the prior two “Letters on Gloucester” has been abandoned. In either the theoretically

finished poem or the work at hand, the focus has switched from the fishermen and their lived experience, to what this experience says and tells us about Maximus (or Olson) himself. It has become a record of a poet writing poetry, and while this is certainly of interest and generative for its readers, is a slight disappointment in its inward turn.

However, while this inward turn moves against the tendency towards inclusiveness noted in the earlier “Letters,” it is here that the link between Olson and his subsequent readers in the Language movement becomes most apparent. Earlier, I quoted Barrett Watten as describing the relationship of the community to Olson as not one coming together, but, “Rather, any actual *polis* is exploded and dispersed by the act of the poem.” This description does not seem to apply to the first “Letters,” but it is easy to see how it might be read into the trepidation towards composition that characterizes this third “Letter.” By turning his attention to the difficulties of writing in the first place, this piece forestalls the issue of community and places the focus squarely on the mind of the poet himself, and, in doing so, presages the skepticism towards the poetic speaker and community that would characterize the Language poets and, even later, Harryette Mullen. Oren Izenberg, in his discussion of Language poetry in *Being Numerous*, notes that for one of the movement’s main theorists, Charles Bernstein, their “institutional mandate” is to explore as a community the ways in which communities are forever being formed and unformed, and Language’s relationship to community is the central problem that their work faces: “The poetic effort to construct a non-parodic version of collectivity in the wake of the fall of historical communism . . . that effort is relegated to fantasy by an inability to imagine that poetry could offer anything other than another set of conventions that come to look oppressive as soon as they are understood to be conventions” (154). If this is the case, then, regardless of the accuracy of his interpretation, Watten’s reading of Olson reveals the Olson that was carried



forward into subsequent poets, highlighting the way in which his work was recontextualized in light of the changing beliefs and philosophies of his readers as Language poetry took shape. Before outside voices and perspectives could be reinserted in Mullen's vernacular avant-garde poetry, a different conception of the subject of the poem and the ways in which a poem could ground itself philosophically would need to be worked out.

## VII. LANGUAGE, RAE ARMANTROUT, AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SINGLE SPEAKER

As was seen in “Projective Verse,” Olson’s poetics theoretically explained how poetry might unite people, if vaguely. The process of energy transfer as enacted by the right sort of poems would create a kind of poetic community amongst those who were able to develop the ear—despite the problems of modernity—that would allow them to understand things as they really were. However, for later poets in the twentieth century such as the Language Poets and their progeny, this transference of meaning became more difficult to imagine as the poetic subject itself became an issue of contention. In Olson’s model, energy needed to transfer between his writer and the world. However, for poets such as Rae Armantrout, who is consistently linked with the Language movement, the possibility of a single meaningful bit of energy to survive even a single poem becomes suspect.

In her poem, “Seconds,” Armantrout explores how the experience felt by the poetic subject is always cohering but never quite cohered in the process of poetic creation. The poem deals with the philosophical problem of personal persistence,<sup>9</sup> asking how much is retained or expressible if much is lost from moment to moment in living one’s life:

A moment is everything

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<sup>9</sup> Typified by Locke’s argument concerning the prince who dies and is reincarnated in the body of a subject with all of his memories fully restored, or, more currently, the debates surrounding Derek Parfit’s contention of the relative unimportance of personal identity.

one person  
(see below)  
takes in simultaneously  
though some  
or much of what  
a creature feels  
may not reach  
conscious awareness  
and only a small part  
(or none) of this  
will be carried forward  
to the next instant. (Armantrout 23)

The moment for the speaker, like the sense datum for certain analytic philosophers, is the basic unit of experience. However, this totality of feeling described by the moment is something its preceptor may not even be aware of, let alone remember afterwards. Armantrout's short lines highlight the difficulty at work in this condition, each segment of a sentence perilously isolated like each transient moment of experience. This raises certain problems for the idea of poetic representation, especially that of the kind that depends, like Olson's, on the possibility of poetry to communicate something between people; after all, in this poem the possibility of a poem being able to communicate anything about the "moment" as it was actually experienced is called into question. As such, what hope is there for any attempt to get beyond the "egocentric lyric speaker" as Olson though projective verse had the potential to do?

One could argue that poems such as Armantrout's are predicated on a paradox: the poem questions the ability of the poet to relay experience about the world, but this is in turn a description of our experience of the world—that we cannot say anything about it—and this seems on its face contradictory. The risk of the claim being made by the poem is that it entails a recursive loop where the poem is endlessly questioning itself, leaving it, like a Cartesian who does not believe in God, with nothing on which to ground your beliefs. The end of the poem, however, gives an answer as to how this fear can be grounded, and it involves others.

Where, for Olson, projective poetry could be used as a tool in itself to uncover the reality that has been effaced by the modern condition, Armantraut, and other Language poets like her, find security not through a more secure metaphysical connection with the world, but in the concurrences of a community. The final lines of her poem, which pun on the title, make this clear: "Any one / not seconded // burns up in a rage" (24). The "seconds" of the title switches from the isolated unit of time to the communicative act of agreement. The danger put forward earlier in the poem is present in the conclusion; after all, without agreement, one potentially "burns up in a rage." Yet those who are seconded avoid the problem put forward above and the rage that such an isolation can yield—the concurrence of other voices negates the above argument by virtue the of a secondary reality granted by such an acknowledgement. Indeed, the clever trap of Armantrout's poem is that, in analyzing it, I prove it to be true by "seconding" it in this critical context. The possibility of community has returned to poetry, and, in doing so it allows for a way around the troublesome philosophical dilemmas that could call into question the possibility of a poetic speaker who can transfer energy in the first place. Williams' machine appears to have broken down.

In contrast to Olson, for whom it is the connection to the world itself that gives poetry its power to communicate something of value to people beyond the poet, for Language poets such as Armantrout and Mullen, the poetry's worth is made possible by the community that is willing (and able) to interact with it in the first place. In this line of argumentation, Watten's description of the polis-as-always-already-dispersed is emblematic of the ways in which Language poetry—for Barrett Watten was a major Language poet—created a poetic lineage that was emblematic of its version of community and political action. For Watten, Olson's politics, then, become a virtue of his form rather than his content, when, in reality, the two are actually inextricable from each other. By turning to Language and Harryette Mullen, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which the dispersion of community feeling in the content of a poem is not mandated by poetic form, and in fact how later poets with a destabilized sense of the poetic speaker still manage to construct a poetics of community in the lineage of the American avant-garde.

## VIII. HARRYETTE MULLEN'S SINGING SUBJECTS

Where Language poets such as Bernstein or Watten were concerned with the ways in which the concept of community was destabilized by language and history, poets who built on the metaphysical developments of the movement, such as Harryette Mullen, explore how the older movement's rigor and skepticism can be put to positive use formulating a communal poetry after the sole lyric subject has been called into question. Harryette Mullen, one such later poet, began her career with relatively simple lyric poems describing the lives of the black women who had raised and shaped her.<sup>10</sup> As her career progressed, she turned to more experimental prose poems to explore the issues of language in collections such as *S\*PeRM\*\*R\*T* (1992), which were less about African American identity specifically, dealt with issues of consumerism and gender. The later collection *Muse & Drudge* (1995) arose in large part out of her concern for the ways in which the avant-garde poetry that she had begun to write had also served to distance her from her readers of color who were not typically included in the community of avant-garde poetry, but were the figures and communities within which her work found its inspiration (*Cracks* 10-11). Its goal was to create a work of avant-garde poetics that was simultaneously available to people

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<sup>10</sup> Her collection, *Tree Tall Women* (1981), features this poem entitled "My Grandmother," which is an effective and, compared to her later work, transparent description of the eponymous relative's life as it was effected by changing race relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

White men  
opening doors  
for her  
was liberation. (*Baby* 26).

who were excluded from the sort of discourse that the academy typically traffics in. As Evie Shockley, in her chapter on Mullen in *Renegade Poetics*, puts it,

Rejecting the commonly accepted construction of “black” and “innovative” as mutually exclusive ways of characterizing poetry, Mullen made it her goal to create a work that would unmistakably “signal” to potential readers that *Muse & Drudge* is “a black book,” even as she pursued her interests in the materiality, ambiguity, and disjunctive quality of language and the destabilization of how “black” signifies. (Shockley 84)

The goal of *Muse & Drudge*, then, is to explore the ways in which the theoretical savvy of poetics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be put to politically ameliorative ends. The community being constructed in the poem is one in which the speakers’ voices (a multiplicity explored below) serves to expand who can talk, and what sort of voices the avant-garde can include. This positioning rejects simplistic narratives of escapes from poverty and abuse, and explores how the lived experience of the women represented by *Muse & Drudge* is worthy of self-representation in a way that transcends that of the limiting, pitying view of those in power, allowing them to participate in a dissensus of those represented poetically and those able to sing their woes.

One concern that often arises in discussions of Mullen’s post-*Tree Tall Women* work is the ambiguity of the “I” speaking across the poems—who is she, and how many she’s does it contain. In other words, if we assume the speaker is plural, then what does that tell us about the specific focus of this specific “I” (or these specific “I”’s) in the poems that I want to consider. However, Mullen has revealed in interviews that the “I” of these poems is typically an other. As she tells Calvin Bedient in an interview, “Any time ‘I’ is used in the poem, it’s practically always quotation: it comes from a blues song, or it comes from a line of Sappho; it comes from—wherever it comes from” (188). This tells us, first, that there the speaker of the poem is not one,

but many—it's polyvocal, as Schockley puts it (86). But it also represents a hesitancy to provide one voice or one viewpoint within the poems: the quotes appear, where they do, without any indication unless one is familiar with the reference, thereby granting both Mullen's words the same status as Sappho's, but also granting any other possible voices the poems may contain an equal register for evaluation. Thus, *Muse & Drudge* blocks out class and cultural differences by placing them in contexts where the readers or listeners of the poems are forced to give them equal weight as an interpretation is constructed. As Shockley notes in her own discussion of this topic, the lyric "I" which a large amount of poetry uses as its center is both tied to its original context as well as the context of Mullen's poetry, therefore, "it [this sampling] prevents the reader from forgetting the work is being created by a poet who has both vernacular and "standard" English fully at her command" (92). Thus, Mullen's poetry, and her playful use of the "I," create a kind of "code-mixing" which levels the scenes (such as they are) which the poem depicts. This, for my purposes, is interesting that it is one instance in which communal solidarity can be formed, as it then makes not only the voices and vernaculars within the poem function equally, but also makes equal the dissatisfactions and frustrations felt across the women depicted by the poems—it forges a community within itself.

At first glance, this is a different kind of inclusional practice than that of the Pound-Olson tradition explored above. Whereas the older poets relied on quotation and citation, Mullen explores a vernacular tradition, using the freedom of the blues and its quatrain form to experiment with "a wide range of lexical choice and levels of diction . . . variation in line length, the possibilities of rhyming or not rhyming . . . or odd lines of prose arranged as lines and stanzas to make 'found poetry,' as well as semantic and syntactic tensions between lines" (*Cracks* 17). If this process lacks the direct archival citation that allows Olson to inhabit the same *polis* as



fisherman across Gloucester's history, this has less to do with Mullen's avoidance of citation as a literary practice, and more to do with the realities of the women for whom *Muse & Drudge* attempts to speak, who, as later readings in this essay of the collection will show, are represented more as objects of inspiration (*Muse*) or pity (*Drudge*). While the voices may not be quoted, this does not mean that the poem does not attempt to include them. According to Mullen, the book is a conscious effort to engage black readers by being so saturated with "black vernacular language and black cultural references that nearly every quatrain signifies (on) some aspect of African American experience" (quoted in Shockley 84). In actual practice, to turn to the text itself, this means that a line from the poem can move across registers with startling speed. The first line of the text, "Sapphire's lyre styles" (99) moves from the image of the Sapphire (a stereotype of a black woman known for overwhelming demeanor) to the lyre, connecting the vernacular image to an ancient tradition of poetry and performance. This connection also serves to turn the Sapphire herself from a figure of opprobrium to a sort of epic poet in her own right—the blues epic and its figures enter into the poetic tradition through Mullen's clever mixing of registers and images.

As this mixing demonstrates, the expansion of the distribution of the sensible, in Mullen's work, is the way in which her work challenges the division between the avant-garde and the "minority" poet. As Mullen, in an essay entitled "Poetry and Identity," laments, "'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not 'formally innovative'" (11). This democratic fashioning of the speaker ties into, as Mullen frequently mentions in interviews, her idea of who her audience is, that it contains a more diverse group of people than might typically be interested in the sorts of poetry that are written by professors of English. However, it should be mentioned, as Jessica Lewis Luck points out in her essay "Entries

on a Post-Language Poetics in Harryette Mullen's *Dictionary*, that, "The theorists of lyric and Language poetics have certainly drawn the battle lines: inspiration or systematization, lyric "I" or language function, voice or noise. But contemporary experimental poetries often tell a different story" (358). So while Mullen may be skeptical of the "I" and resist giving her readers too simple a persona at the heart of the work, it should be said that she cannot pretend to write without attention to voice. In her poetry, there still is a jar in Tennessee for the wilderness to be ordered around, and I do not think she pretends otherwise. In an essay entitled "Imagining the Unimagined Reader," she writes, "I write for myself and others. An other is anyone who is not me. Anyone who is not me is like me in some ways and unlike me in other ways" (*Cracks* 3). Her imagined reader, then, could conceivably be anyone, but it is an audience which specifically excludes herself, or that sort of organizing, perceptive center, because then her writing would be limited to herself in a way that her personal poetics might disagree with. By this I mean that Mullen composes not in a confessional manner, though autobiographical content may very well take up space in her poetry, but in such a way as to welcome and entertain the voices of others besides herself, and that this inclusion is something that she keeps in mind while composing the work. This explains why it is so important for her that her audiences be more than merely academic, and it also explains why her poems, especially those within *Muse & Drudge*, may inspire conflicting interpretations without invalidating the sense of togetherness they were intended to create. Mullen relates in the same essay how she feels both a distance and an affinity with the narrators of slave-narratives, one that she "imagine[s] is similar to that of the unborn reader who might encounter my work in some possible future" (3). This statement reveals both how she understands a reader's relationship to a text, but also reveals a certain utopic through-line in her thought. By likening her own texts to this sort of "discontinuity," as she puts it, she

implies that there is hope for the future, that what her speakers and poems represent will not be the case forever, and so will, if the future works out well, yield a similar kind of discontinuity for her imagined audience. To be sure, this democratization and attack on normative styles of writing and speech goes beyond just the sampling or the “I” figures. As Huehl points out in his essay on the use and intentional misuse of figures of speech in Mullen, “. . . she clearly uses the pun’s structural doubleness to offer a linguistically-based epistemological novel which can overcome strict determinacy” (26). This abdication of determinacy and embracing of ambiguity down to the level of the text’s constant punning reveals how key humor and playfulness is to Mullen’s disruptions, how these disruptions are central to the poem’s ultimate goals.

Moreover, in term of the schema developed within this essay, Mullen’s disruptions recall Rancière’s concept of the redistribution of the sensible, but in a way that crucially differs from Olson. Both poets are concerned with the ethics of representation, yet the ways in which Olson and Mullen respond to the question of “who can speak” are epistemological and ontological, respectively.<sup>11</sup> For Olson, the primacy of the *Maximus-personae* questions institutions that are epistemological—How can Maximus know what he talks about? Where does knowledge about the world lie? How can one get back down to the root of things? In contrast to this, Mullen’s skepticism of the singular lyric “I” calls into question the idea that a consistent, singular person is speaking in the first place. Earlier in this paper, I argued that, for readers of Whitman, while

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<sup>11</sup> This distinction is borrowed from Brian McHale’s description of the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction in his book, *Postmodern Fiction*. Using the example of the detective story as the prototypical modernist form of storytelling, McHale explains that the earlier period, in very broad strokes, relied on questions of epistemology in its approach to engaging the world. A detective has to sort through his sources; treating each with suspicion to question how he knows that each source is getting down to the truth at the heart of things. On the other hand, postmodern fiction questions the existence of any truth at the heart of things at all. For example, in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* the reality of the conspiracy that the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, seeks to uncover is always left in doubt. The book never lets itself resolve into a solution; there is no answer to the puzzle that it presents. This distinction serves as a useful hermeneutic distinction in that it shows how the two poets engaged with at length in this essay differ in terms of philosophy as well as form.

there is ambiguity as to who is being channeled by the poetic Whitman voice, it is always clear that they are being channeled through the singular, leveling voice of the speaker, who is claiming to contain “multitudes” in the first place. In contrast to this, as will be explored below, the figures in Mullen’s *Muse & Drudge* are both represented and given a voice; attention is called just as much to the buried potential of joining the discourse of their own representation as it is in representing them in the first place. The “I” of the poem is as ambiguous as it is because it is supposed to function as an expansion of the distribution of the sensible, to return once again to Rancière, disrupting the given patterns of aesthetic representation by demonstrating how these women are able to enter into and disrupt the harmful norms that both silence them and make them objects of pity because of their silencing.

The poem itself appears to explain this technique, as the section on 110 tells us, “try others but none lasted / a shame they went that way / missing referents murking it up / with clear actors lacking.” The latter half of the quatrain tells the reader something she would already have experienced in this very poem: there is an ambiguity in this work (and, perhaps the poem would argue, the reality of the women for whom the poem speaks more broadly), and this is only made worse by the ambiguity of the language which is filled with pronouns without referents, where people are made interchangeable. Reading backwards, then, a possible meaning for the beginning of the quatrain becomes clear. The “others” of the first two lines similarly have their differences erased and the realities of their individuality erased. “They went that way,” but the reader is never told who they were, or why, a distinctionlessness that, in light of the third and fourth lines, is “murking” something up. The poem manages to portray a problem for someone about something, though as the section goes on, and it begins to offer points of rebellion, this initial problem appears to be surpassed in some way. An “us” is introduced in the second

quatrain, one that is “too loud too strong too black bad,” presumably qualities that upset a “them” left unmentioned.

From here, the poem switches to concrete imagery: “butch knife/ cuts cut/ opening open/ flower flowers flowering” (110). Although these lines are ostensibly more sensible and portray some kind of transition (from the knife, to the cut, to the opening, to the flowering of *something*), they still refuse to give a clear image. It is unclear for the reader if the actions depicted occur *to something* (e.g. are acts of physical violence or transgressions) or are something more abstract. Regardless, the end of the poem, “scratched out hieroglyphs/ the songs of allusion/ and even the motion/ changing of our own violins,” speaks to a change in the consciousness between the four quatrains from problem to a sort of solution. And this solution comes from the “songs” of allusion and “scratched out hieroglyphs” and, by virtue of paratactic placement “the motion of *our* violins changing.” Therefore, the tone of the poem as well as its hopeful ending stem from the existence of an “us” who can produce something which, unlike the unknown “others” which begin the poem, can last and become embodied by the plurality of referents to the community represented, one which exists on the “dirty streets,” creates hieroglyphs, and plays the violin, certainly a wide-range of activities, though the poem refuses to treat these realities unequally.

Moreover, that final stanza, in addition to the solidarity and idea of artistic production it encourages, also, in its spread across history, reflects the way in which Mullen’s poem attempts to function as a way of bringing supposedly distinct cultures together in such a way that they inflect and surpass one another. Julianna Sphar argues that this is distinct from modernist intertextuality, “which tends to function as a sort of tale of the tribe that often reinforces dominant canonical groups” (103). In contrast, Mullen’s work, though “highly literate” “charts different sorts of cultural literacy and suggests alternative canons . . . . The allusions of her work

function more as preservation of often overlooked works and traditions” (103). In other words, where Joyce, in *Ulysses*’ “Oxen of the Sun” chapter works through and gently teases the development of English literature while also laying claim to its presence in it, Mullen’s references act as a documentary of forms that were “overlooked” and had wanted for inclusion in this sort of canon. While I agree with her distinction between modernist intertextuality and the kind of work that Mullen is doing in these poems, I take issue with Spahr’s characterization because it seems to me that the word “preservation” is too calcifying to accurately describe the free-play of cultures that I think Mullen wants to bring in dialogue. On the level of the poem just considered, we witness postmodern grammatical play switching to vernacular to arrive at a catalogue of both modern and antiquated modes of expression (hieroglyphs to songs of allusion). The work refuses to serve merely as a museum piece for alternate modes of expression, rather it brings those alternate modes into dialogue with the “standard” forms, neither approving nor disapproving of the voices themselves. Rather than “rewrite history” to be more inclusive, I would say that, in these poems Mullen wants to show how categories, though they may be established with the best intentions, necessarily create problematic dichotomies and evaluations. After all, this is a surreal poem that takes on many registers but limits itself formally to the quatrain—it wants to leave the door open to all forms and types of expression without giving too much emphasis to any one part.

Speaking of the quatrains, one counter-argument that can be raised against my readings at this point is that Mullen herself, as Juliana Spahr quotes her, says that the purpose of the quatrain as a unit of composition was its flexibility and interchangeable nature, specifically how quatrains could be delivered and swapped in and out of the poem in any order depending on the whim of the performer (*Autonomy* 103). Thus, a reading such as the one I offer above (or any of the

readings that I will go on to offer), conflict with this principle at the heart of the work. In response I would say that, yes, oftentimes there do seem to be pages in which the quatrains only contain the loosest of connections to each other. Yet at the same time, there are other places in the text where the connections seem much stronger, and—while I think the text’s recombinatorial possibilities are interesting and fascinatingly generative—I’m working with this text as it appears on the page, an organization that has been purposefully selected by Mullen herself in writing of the book as it was published. Therefore, while new texts can be created or inspired by a remixing of this sampled collage that does not invalidate the way in which it appears in print. Perhaps this paper is a monument to a tendency towards over-analysis, but I feel that it is much more likely that, like many songs, there exists a reason for the original order, even if that reasoning is not always apparent.

To this point, in one representative poem, the reader receives a documentary depiction of some kind “preserving” some kind of existence, though the poem makes it clear that this kind of preservation is unwelcome: “handheld interview cuts to/ steady voice over view/ extra vagrants gobble up the scenery/ the camera’s gonna roll over you” (157). The “steady voice” imparts meaning to the scene; the “extra vagrants” imply that actors have been hired to make the scene more “real” for its audience. Regardless of what Oscars it may go on to win, the poem’s opinion is settled, the story being filmed is a flattening of the real scene that *Muse & Drudge* has been attempting to represent in its own terms. The next stanza reveals with extreme distaste what that flattening appears to be: “discarded barnacled bard / grinning with bad dentures / remembering coonskin adventures / in your hackneyed backyard” (157). The racism inherent in this depiction does not need my elucidation. Regardless, it is easy to see how a lazy, callous sort of

representation, imposed by someone replicating in the material their own beliefs, can erase all of the pride and culture that one may have had living in one of these now-flattened communities.

Where the poems are definitely supportive of the creation of music to represent the singer and her travails, or, more broadly, art that does the same, this objectifying and simplifying camera gaze is portrayed as an other against which the poem aligns itself. Rather than creating communal feeling or preserving originality, the objects before the camera are reduced to signifiers of poverty or other conceptions that the documentary might lay over them. Here, the reader is given an example of precisely what sort of representation is unwelcome—namely that which purports objectivity without truly grappling with the reality of the subject’s existence. Therefore, it seems safe to say that *Muse & Drudge* searches for something beyond preservation, that what it searches for and prioritizes has more to do with creation and community rather than the mere representation of a disappearing American subculture.

This rejection of the purely documentary extends to a later poem in which some kind of minor housework-related disaster is caught on film, either via security camera (with disturbing implications for the home it depicts) or as an art installation, which, like the documentary, limits the subjectivity of the figure it captures in order to make her a representative figure in the artist’s point: “another video looping/ the orange juice execution/ her brains spilled milk/ on the killing floor” (175). Admittedly, the poem itself is agnostic as to where this video might be shown, but the flatness of the description and the reduction of the woman—who is not given a clear voice—marks a change in the treatment of the poem’s contents, an example of a reduced object rather than a subject who gives voice to her feelings. This may point to a broader connection within the poem between the flat mimeses of this kind of “factual” representation and the objectification of the individual without the *Muse & Drudge*’s preferred investigations of individuality and



subjectivity. This objectivity always foregrounds difference where the poem strives to find inclusiveness.

Speaking of this tendency towards inclusiveness, the reader notices that at other moments, the poems offer spaces to other voices, which may view that kind of unmoored fantasy (if that's what it is) as something not worth having: "I dream a world/ and then what/ my soul is resting/ but my feet are tired" (101). For this speaker, dreams or alternatives are nice, but are less important than the physical fact of her tired feet. Instead, she describes herself as she is: "half the night gone/ I'm holding my own/ some half forgotten tune/ casual funk from a darker back room" (101), before moving on to ask an ambiguous "you" (perhaps the person who first asked her to imagine a dream), "how would you know/ if you've never tasted [quatrain ends here] a ramble in brambles . . . ." Rather than imagine something, the speaker goes back to her own life and her own experiences to construct something. It shows a distrust for simple utopianism and instead asks for something more relevant and, for lack of a better word, worldly. The pain of the world is mixed with its pleasures, and so denying them would rob the speaker of her good memories as well as her pain—the brambles may prick, but they were, we might assume, worth it for the ramble. Where the poem discussed prior to this one did seem to offer some kind of alternative, *Muse & Drudge* also approaches other viewpoints without condescension. The speaker's insistence on retaining her physicality and reality is treated with as much respect as the poem's ambiguous turn to some sort of change, bringing a democracy to the poem's normative evaluations.

In a few of the poems of the collection, art (or the art-world) takes center stage as a figure that Mullen's polyvocal chorus reacts against. In one, Mullen takes aim at a certain sort of suitor, the "mister arty martyr/ a jackass to water/ changing partners/ in the middle of a scream" (170).

This target becomes a great example for how humor works in this collection. The figure here, whose name strikes a visual pun with the word “martyr” which follows, is undercut by the sharpness of the speaker’s satire, all of his seriousness draining out in that stanza like a pricked balloon. His emotions and his seriousness are staged—he changes partners in the middle of a scream, which recalls both the famous modernist work of art, which puns on its assonance with the word “scene” to call to mind the ways in which his personality is both callous and performative. It is all an act, but it is also an act that is self-defeating. He “loses forever,” and is the own agent of his downfall in the third quatrain on this page, where he, “delirious boozier/ he smoothes her sutures / removes a moocher / from her future” (170). Thus, he creates the conditions through which he will be expunged, being, as he appears to be at least in this poem simply intolerable, and not very talented besides: he is, the reader is told, “bereft of flavor/ for lack of endeavor.” However, this piece is not merely of interest for its satire—Mullen’s targets are not depicted alone, removed from the harm they caused. The poem concludes on a much more serious note, depicting the woman (or women) left behind by such a man, “a thing of shreds and patches/ hideous scarecrow she/ puts teeth in any nightmare/ of the man who sleeps with matches.” The implication here, then, being that the work of art our “mister arty martyr” managed to produce was the woman he pushed away, and so Mullen gives the reader an image of a thing to scare away such men—a figure with agency, whose hideousness does not make her a muse (or a drudge for that matter), but something that cannot be reduced to easily manipulated categories. The art created by this figure depends upon the figure of the “muse,” but, like Olson’s critique of the faceless, pure figure of “the people,” the muse the “arty martyr” depends upon is faceless. His partners can change because they are unimportant in the face of the art being created. Mullen’s criticisms are much like Olson’s in that they attack the dichotomy of the

artist/represented figure, but she also explores the ways in which these conceptions are gendered as well as class (or power) based.

In the companion poem on the facing page, Mullen reveals a different set of issues with respect to art and posturing, but one that follows in kind from the above:

Slashing both your wrists to  
look tough and glamorous  
Dead shot up in the art gallery  
You can keep your shirt on already

While I slip into something more funkable  
Rub-a-dub with rusty man abrasions  
Was I hungry sleepy horny or sad  
On that particular occasion (171)

I lay out these two stanzas in their entirety in this instance because they function as contrasting depictions of womanhood. On one hand, we have the “tough and glamorous” figure of the first stanza, who does herself harm (or at least appears to) in order to “look” as if she is a certain type in the context of the art gallery. The use of the verb “look” implying that her actual subjectivity may or may not be at odds with the role she has stuck herself with. In contrast, the woman of the second stanza slips into something more “funkable” and can exist happily in her body, with all the pleasures that such an existence entails. Moreover, where the other woman cannot help but be serious and tough in her appearance and attitude, the second woman is able to suggest that her moods are many—even being hungry or sad poses a challenge to the one note reduction of the woman in the art gallery. The poem ends with a model of more “real” toughness:

“slandered and absurdly slurred/ wife divorced her has-been/ last man on earth hauls ass to the ash can/ his penis flightier than his word” (171). The woman here, then, acts as a model for one who does not pose as tough, but takes concrete action in her life, and, in contrast to the poseur of the opening paragraph, her expression is more meaningful because it does not take place in a rarefied context, but, like so many blues songs, is an example of real pain in the real world.

Moving on to productive and positive models, certain sections of the poem exemplify how the poetic, singing act might itself serve as a model for how the “musing” of the title might create the community which I have been continually asserting that the poem creates. The section on page 147 begins with the stanza, “hooked on phonemes imbued with exuberance/ our spokeswoman listened for lines/ heard tokens of quotidian/ corralled in ludic routines.” The spokeswoman (perhaps the voice of the poem embodied) is someone with a unique attachment to language who was able to reach out into “tokens of quotidian” and assemble these bits and phrases into something else, something more meaningful. This is in contrast to the “slumming umbra alums/ lost some of their parts/ getting a start/ in the department of far art”—while the context is unclear, the use of the word “slumming” signifies a distrust for their work that perhaps the present poem is able to go beyond because it does not contain their biases or goals to work in “the department of far art.” This scatological pun at the end there makes it very clear what evaluative decision the speaker has reached on these experimental poets.

For this, at the end, the final quatrain delivers a kind of work ethic of the poet: “dark work and hard/ though any mule can/ knock down the barn/ what we do best requires finesse” (147). The mule, a drudge, is in this case set apposite the muse (or muses) in the we—two different kinds of labor are being suggested and given to us, but only one has the skill to pull off the internal rhyme between “best” and “finesse,” a small but nice touch which exemplifies how

controlled this poem is on a line-by-line level. It might be the case that Mullen is positioning herself (and her lineage) in a sort of opposition to the simple-minded anger of the BAM poets, or it could be something more complex than that. Regardless, this provides an inclusive model which points the reader to both the goal of the poem, and also hints at the intended infection that *Muse & Drudge*, in its concluding quatrains, hopes it can achieve.

## CONCLUSION: A READING AND A MOMENT OF EASE

*Muse & Drudge* concludes with a poem that implores its reader to “proceed with abandon / finding yourself where you are / and who you’re playing for / what stray companion” (178). These lines recall Whitman, whose “Song of Myself” ends on a similar moment of communal potentiality, “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop some where waiting for you” (131). Where Whitman asks his reader to not give up in reaching the poet, or the poet’s mindset, Mullen’s epic concludes in a slightly different manner. Rather than encouraging the object of her poem to go beyond, she puts emphasis on the present locality, for the people who surround “you,” the people that you are “playing for.” Moreover, it is in recognizing one’s current circumstances that you are “finding yourself,” in the moment and surrounded by that audience, recognizing the ways that the community that you are already embedded in, perhaps hidden by a distribution of the sensible which denies its consolidation. This was the flaw that Olson found in Ferrini’s poetry, in his appealing to the wider world of poetic taste rather than the local realities that surrounded his life.

For Rancière, and likewise for Olson and Mullen, the successful aesthetic act has the potential to highlight the ways in which a political and social community is already extant, if hidden by systems of control and preconceptions that we do not understand. For Olson, this entails the break-down of the division between life and art, the recognition that both entail various forms of labor that, in the end, allow us to shape and understand the world around us

with purpose rather than the passivity that characterizes modern society. For Mullen, this means an exploration of the ways in which avant-garde form and vernacular speech can be used to uncover the hidden subjectivities of African American women, allowing their voices, through a communal “I” to perform in and of themselves in an idiom that owes as much to the epic tradition of Pound as it does to voices that are more local and less likely to be included in the written record. In both cases, the poets deconstruct the dichotomies that underpin both undemocratic and harmful systems of rule and representation, undermining the ways in which their respective status quos rely on systems that are exclusionary and harmful to their participants. If, in the end, Mullen’s singing Muses counteract the limitations of Olson’s still dominantly patriarchal polis, this does not indict Olson’s work so much as demonstrate the ways in which political communities, over time, must expand and be refashioned to be ever more inclusive of those that they have left out. There is no poetic endpoint to the project that I have outlined in this essay, just continual necessary disruptions of the distribution of the sensible so that dissensus may be continually reintroduced into our lives and communities.

The poets that I have grappled with above exemplify, in very different ways, the way in which poetry is not something above and apart from the communities that it describes and the labors upon which it is based, but a practice that has the potential to describe a new vision of a community that encompasses all of the processes and members upon which it is based. Likewise, as the Rancière quote which serves as the epigraph to this essay attests, my readings of these poems have sought to elucidate the ways in which avant-garde texts might be read not “symptomatically,” but in such a way that their breaking down of old dichotomies points towards a future political community less encumbered by the delimitations that limit both the possibilities of aesthetic experience and the potential for democratic emancipation.

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